



**Pak-Russia Geostrategic Cooperation:
From Bilateralism to Multilateral Engagement (2012-2024)**

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Abstract:

This paper analyses the evolving Pak-Russia relationship within a geostrategic context, tracing the changing dynamics of their relationship from bilateral engagement to multilateral collaborations within platforms such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and Pakistan's potential engagement with BRICS. The primary focus of this paper is to address the security threats posed by various militias and non-militia groups equally to both states in the region. Employing a qualitative case study approach, the research relies on policy documents, official statements, interviews and academic literature analyzed through the lens of the complex interdependence theoretical approach. The study explores the mutual relationship regarding security, energy diplomacy and regional alignment post-2012 that has shaped this partnership. It critically examines the key events, including joint military initiatives, industrial frameworks and collaborations that underpin the cooperation. Findings reveal that while the historical mistrust and external constraints, including the Western sanctions, limited the cooperation between the states, gradually the potential for collaboration expanded in counterterrorism, energy security and regional connectivity. The research enhances the concept of multilateralism in South Asia and contributes to the collective response to emerging security threats, fostering interdependence as a pragmatic form of cooperation in a multipolar world.

Keywords: BRICS, SCO, Pakistan-Russia relations. geostrategic cooperation, multilateral diplomacy, interdependence, bilateral agreement

INTRODUCTION

In recent decades, the international system has undergone a significant shift from rigid bloc politics to more interest-based, rational alignments. In international relations, there is no permanent ally or permanent enemy; relationships change according to the national interests, which compel states to act in certain ways. Within this context, Pakistan and Russia, which were positioned as opposites

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during the Cold War, have gradually recalibrated their foreign policy towards pragmatic engagement. The bilateral relationship has witnessed significant development since 2012, particularly through cooperation on security, energy and multilateral forums (Hanif, 2013). The relationship has grown closer with Pakistan's inclusion in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and its effort to join BRICS to collaborate with Russia on energy and security issues (Khan, 2023).

Multilateral forums have provided both Islamabad and Moscow with new avenues for structured dialogues and cooperation, especially on issues concerning national security, energy collaboration and the need for a coordinated response to emerging challenges in Afghanistan, Central Asia and the broader Eurasian region. These developments encourage both states to signal a shift away from bilateralism towards broader multilateral frameworks. Despite these crucial developments, much of the scholarly debate on Pakistan-Russia relations remains narrowly focused on multilateral platforms. This research seeks to fill the gap by tracing the evolution of Pak-Russia geostrategic relations from 2012 to 2024, aiming to analyse how bilateral progress in multilateral alignments, especially through forums like the SCO, has reshaped the strategic calculus of both countries in a drastically changing world order.

This paper argues that the deepening of Pakistan-Russia relations is not based solely on bilateral affairs but rather reflects a broader regional and global realignment. Their increasing collaboration within multilateral structures reveals a shift towards multipolar engagement and strategies that prioritise connectivity, shared strategic steps, mutual interests and stability over the traditional ideological divides.

This study has the following objectives: To explore the key drivers behind Pakistan's foreign policy move towards Russia between 2012-2024, particularly in terms of geostrategic and regional security interests in Afghanistan, and; to examine the level of geostrategic cooperation between Russia and Pakistan, primarily focusing on bilateral to multilateral opportunities. This study addresses the following research questions: What are the primary drivers of Pakistan's foreign policy move towards Russia between 2012-2024, notably in terms of geostrategic and regional security interests in Afghanistan? What is the level of geostrategic cooperation between Russia and Pakistan, primarily focusing on bilateral to multilateral opportunities?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The historic relationship of Pakistan with the US and Russia with India was the major backdrop that continue to influence their relationship under the contemporary setup. The major reason for both states' reluctance to cooperate was India's position as a rival neighbouring state of Pakistan on one side, and the stance of Pakistan on US military presence in Afghanistan, especially regarding Talibanization, since the post-Cold War period. However, with evolving geostrategic dynamics, the Two States converge on the shared concern, which is the risk of security posed by the militant groups to both sides equally. Russia is concerned about the security of Central Asia, and Pakistan is concerned about its Western borders. Hence, due to this mutual concern, which is not only shared by Pakistan and Russia, but also by China and India, Pakistan emerges as the only State that could potentially mitigate the issue by negotiating with the Taliban. Therefore, there is hope that positive developments could be seen in the relationship between the countries (Amin, 2016).

Pak-Russia Rapprochement: Challenges and Prospects in Evolving Regional Dynamics presents an evolving relationship between Russia and Pakistan. The book identifies key findings related to historical context, geopolitical shifts, counterterrorism cooperation, economic collaboration, regional dynamics and diplomatic challenges. It emphasizes that while significant prospects exist for deepening cooperation, addressing challenges and nurturing mutual trust will be crucial for the success of this rapprochement. The findings underscore several challenges that could impede the progress of the Pak-Russia rapprochement. These challenges include historical mistrust, divergent geopolitical priorities, Pakistan's traditional alliances and Russia's relations with other regional actors. The book highlights the importance of addressing these challenges through sustained dialogue, confidence-building measures and a pragmatic approach (Naqvi, 2015).

Pakistan and Russia's relationship has remained relatively smooth since 2000, when Pakistan stood against terrorism and detached itself from the Taliban, who posed a serious threat to Russia and impacted Central Asia via Afghanistan. The relationship further strengthened when both States signed a defense agreement and conducted mutual military exercises. As India's relationship with the US deepened and the trade between India and Russia declined, Russia grew closer to Pakistan. Moreover, Pakistan's membership in the SCO and its role in Afghanistan marked breakthrough in the relationship. Moreover, Pakistan's geographical importance, the project of CPEC and the Russian interest in accessing warm water resources have further attracted Russia and Pakistan as well to get direct access to Central Asia to fulfil their energy need, bringing both nations closer. A proactive policy is needed for Pakistan to sustain and expand its relationship with Russia (Khan, 2019).

The world is shifting from unipolarity to multipolarity and with the changing dynamics of the world, the foreign policy of Pakistan is also evolving. As the US increasingly growing its relationship with India, especially in the present era of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the tilt of Pakistan is directed towards Russia. However, the relationship of Pakistan with Russia has never been as strong as it has been with the US. However, despite Pakistan's weakening ties with the US, it still wants to balance its relationship with Russia and the US at the same time, but it is difficult. Pakistan's strong ties with China are often negatively interpreted by the US. On the other hand, the emergence new global bloc and shifting world order are increasing the risk of a new cold war and providing geopolitical opportunity to Pakistan (Khan, 2018).

The existing literature on Pak-Russia foreign policy is mostly related to the Cold War era and viewed through the lens of Soviet-Russia and US-Pakistan relations. The theoretical framework under the existing literature supports the "zero-sum" game approach rooted in the structural realism of Kenneth Waltz. However, more recent literature provides a regional perspective on Russia's involvement in Afghanistan and its implications for the peace of Eurasia, aligning with the approach of this study. However, most of the literature neglects the Russia-Pakistan relationship individually or bilaterally, solely in terms of the need of both states towards each other, instead of relating it to the US or India. While Russia is facing heavy sanctions in Europe and the West due to its involvement in Ukraine, and hence it needed a potential buyer for gas and military equipment, Pakistan, in turn, needs Russia to fulfil its energy needs. On the other hand, to bring peace in Afghanistan and protect Eurasia, Pakistan is a more suitable partner in South Asia due to its strategic location and better relationship with the Taliban, which could not be neglected by Russia.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For theoretical explanation, the study is based on liberalism in general and Neoliberalism in particular. The study supports the theory of complex interdependence put forth by Joseph Nye and Robert Keohane. According to the complex interdependence: "Issues in international relations are interconnected. States frequently interconnect under diverse problems and collectively find solutions. The practice of issue linkages enables states to discover interests in various areas, fostering cooperation even amid conflict" (Keohane & Nye, 2011).

The interests of a state never remain constant; they change with the changing environment. When the US started developing a strong relationship with India, both Russia and Pakistan realized the need for a change in their foreign policies toward each other. Russia sought to build a strong relationship with Pakistan due to its geopolitical importance and better trade opportunities under the umbrella of CPEC. Pakistan aimed to build its relationship with Russia to fulfil its energy needs, gain direct access to Eurasian countries and defense imports from Russia to strengthen its military capability. Moreover, through the platform of SCO, both Russia and Pakistan are collaborating to combat terrorism in the region. Hence, the dynamics in the Pak-Russia relationship vary under a changing world from unipolarity to multipolarity, where China and Russia could become key game changers in the future.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study uses a qualitative research design to examine Pak-Russia Geostrategic Cooperation: From Bilateral to Multilateral (2012-2024). The qualitative research approach is appropriate because it allows for an in-depth analysis of the factors discussed in the paper and provides a more detailed understanding of the dynamics of the Pak-Russian relationship. For this research, exploratory and analytical methods are used.

For the data collection, both primary and secondary sources have been utilized. For primary sources, interviews and official documents from governmental institutions such as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MOFA), as well as an interviews with an international relations expert, are utilized for content analysis. For secondary sources, books, journals, theses, newspapers and other internet sources are used for the accumulation of data and to develop a better understanding of the topic.

EVOLUTION OF PAK-RUSSIA RELATIONS

Historically, Pakistan-Russia relations have been shaped by the Cold War alignments and ideological polarization. When Pakistan gained independence, there was a bipolar world order, where two superpowers, United States and the Soviet Union, were seeking influence through strategic alliances. Due to the perceived regional hostility from India, Pakistan prioritized its national security by aligning with the US-led bloc. Among Pakistani elites, this strategic partnership was considered a counterbalance to Indian military and political priorities (Khan, 2019).

However, as time unfolded, the calculus of Pakistan's foreign policy evolved. Under the administration of President Ayub Khan, Pakistan embarked on a path to normalize diplomatic relations with the USSR, unlike the entrenched animosity that characterized its relationship with India (Lerski, 1974). The historic visit of President Ayub Khan to the USSR in 1965 marked a significant diplomatic development in Pakistan-Russia relations. Subsequently, during the Indo-

Pakistan war in 1960, the USSR played a crucial role as a mediator and facilitated negotiations that led to the Tashkent agreement (Amin, 1980).

Despite these efforts, Pakistan's alliance with the US and Russia's Indo-centric foreign policy left both states with lingering mistrust (Naqvi & Masood, 2017). The Cold War period witnessed limited diplomatic relations due to mutual suspicion ideological divergence.

Phase-I: Recalibration of Ties (2012-2015)

Between 2012 and 2015, Pakistan and Russia underwent notable changes in their bilateral relations, where they recalibrated after the decades-long mistrust rooted in Cold War alignments. This recalibration was the result of the gradual withdrawal of the US and NATO forces from Afghanistan, particularly after the killing of Osama Bin Laden in 2011, signaling a shift in the strategic balance of power in South Asia. Though the complete withdrawal of the US forces came years later, it offered a ray to Pakistan and Russia to recalibrate their foreign policies. Traditionally aligned with India, Russia began diversifying its foreign policy in South Asia, while Pakistan expanded its strategic options beyond the Western alignment. Recognizing the vacuum, both Russia and Pakistan initiated defense and energy dialogues, marking a significant strategic policy orientation (Korybko, 2018).

In 2014, a breakthrough in military relations was occurred when Pakistan and Russia underwent their first-ever exercise in the Arabian Sea. This exercise involved Pakistan Maritime Security Agency Vessels and a Russian Naval Warship, focusing on maritime security and anti-narcotics operations ("Defence ties: Pak-Russia," 2014).

In 2015, a landmark development took place when Russia lifted its arms embargo on Pakistan (Raza S. , 2018). Later, this was followed by a significant agreement in the same year to build the North-South Gas pipeline, aimed at strengthening economic ties and strategic dependencies. To further set the tone on emerging bilateral agendas, including counterterrorism, economic, regional security and connectivity, a high-level diplomatic exchange was held between Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov and Pakistan's National Security Adviser Sartaj Aziz in 2014 (Government of Pakistan, 2014).

The discussions on the North-South Gas Pipeline project, which is a \$2 billion initiative aimed at transporting liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) from Karachi to Lahore, are evidence of Russia's interest in Pakistan's energy sector. These engagements laid a foundation for future collaboration by highlighting mutual interest in energy security, economic connectivity and regional stability (Government of Pakistan, 2017).

Phase II: Emerging Strategic Convergence (2016-2018)

From 2016 to 2018, Pakistan and Russia witnessed a prominent strategic convergence; during this time, military ties strengthened for the regional security alignment, particularly concerning Afghanistan.

One of the significant developments was the initiation of joint military drills "Druzhba" (Friendship), which began in 2016 and have continued every year. These military drills symbolize the growing trust between Islamabad and Moscow, as well as between their armed forces. In 2017, Russia also delivered four MI-35M attack helicopters to Pakistan, further solidifying defense ties and recalibrating Russia's strategic interest in South Asia (Raza, 2018).

In April 2018, then COAS General Qamar Javed Bajwa visited Russia for joint military training. It was the third consecutive visit by a Pakistani military official. Moreover, an agreement signed between the military officials of both States, concluding the inaugural session of the Russian-Pakistan Joint Military Consultative Committee (JMCC). The Defense Ministry characterized it as a paramount platform for defense collaboration between Russia and Pakistan (Syed, 2018). The military training between Russia and Pakistan gained momentum after the President of the US, Donald Trump, cut off the military training program with Pakistan (Iqbal, 2018).

Phase III: Institutionalisation and Multilateral Engagement (2019-2021)

From 2019 to 2021, greater institutionalization and multilateral cooperation were witnessed between Pakistan and Russia. The increased coordination within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization is evident, where both nations share security and development goals.

In April 2021, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov visited Pakistan to reaffirm Moscow's support for regional connectivity initiatives. Moscow's support included discussions on the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) discussion, as well as trade, energy, defense and counterterrorism (Hashim, 2021). Russia also showed willingness to invest in energy infrastructure, including the Pakistan Steam Gas Pipeline, reflecting deepening economic engagement.

On June 15, 2021, Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi and his Russian counterpart Sergey Lavrov held a telephone call, during which both agreed to cooperate on the Afghan settlement ("Pakistan, Russia agree," 2021). Cooperation on regional security remains one of the essential points in Pak-Russia foreign policy.

y. Under the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), PM Imran Khan addressed Afghan security issues several times. In September 2021, PM Imran Khan addressed at the SCO summit held in Dushanbe, Uzbekistan, where he emphasized that a coordinated approach towards regional cooperation and Afghan issues is needed for regional stability (Naz, 2021).

During this phase, the institutional mechanisms like the Pakistan Russia Intergovernmental Commission (IGC) and the Pakistan Russia Consultative group on Strategic Stability became more active. Under these bodies, the regular dialogues on economic, political and strategic matters were regulated.

Phase IV: Contemporary Developments and the Ukraine War (2022-2024)

In 2022, the ongoing Russian-Ukraine war presented new challenges and opportunities for Pakistan-Russia relations, as Russia faced heavy sanctions from the West and Europe. Pakistan adopted a policy of neutrality and abstained from voting on resolutions condemning Moscow at the United Nations.

In February 2022, PM Imran Khan's visit to Russia served as a significant landmark in the history of the Pak-Russia bilateral and diplomatic relationship, which was highly highlighted by the world for two reasons. The first is that, after PM Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, Imran Khan is the second PM of Pakistan to visit Russia, which happened after 23 years. Second, the timing of the visit withdrew international focus. Khan visited Russia in February 2022, a time when a conflict between Russia and Ukraine was escalating and Russia was likely planning to launch its invasion. Right after the visit of PM Imran

Khan, Russia jumped into the war, which has been interpreted differently by the international community.

Pakistani PM's visit to Russia portrayed the growing relationship between both states, where PM Imran Khan was given a red-carpet welcome by Moscow, and the meeting lasted three hours. (Yousaf, 2022). During the meeting, the officials from both states exchanged their views on the bilateral relationship, regional issues and development in South Asia (Hashim, 2022). Moreover, they discussed the oil imports, with Russia offering 30-40% discount on crude oil exports to Pakistan during the visit.

Despite heavy international pressure, Pakistan continued diplomatic dialogues with Russia. During the 2022 SCO summit in Samarkand, Prime Minister Shahbaz Sharif met President Vladimir Putin, where they mutually discussed cooperation and regional stability. Media reports also indicated that Pakistan is interested in importing oil at a discounted price through Moscow, which demonstrates Islamabad's rational approach to securing its energy needs amid rising global prices (Siddiqui, 2022).

In July 2024, at the SCO summit in Astana, Pakistani and Russian leaders reaffirmed their commitment to economic connectivity, counterterrorism and climate diplomacy. In October 2024, Pakistan hosted the SCO Heads of Government Summit, attended by Russian PM Mikhail Mishustin, further strengthening the institutional dialogue (Government of Pakistan, 2024).

During 2023, bilateral trade between Pakistan and Russia surpassed \$1 billion and reached approximately \$1.3 billion in 2024. Later, a trade agreement was signed in December 2024 in terms of barter trade, which exchanged Russian lentils and chickpeas for Pakistani rice and potatoes. During Deputy Prime Minister Alexey Overchuk's visit, Pakistan and Russia signed multiple MOUs including energy, infrastructure, higher education, visa liberalization and agricultural trade. The 9th Intergovernmental Commission (ITC) in December 2024 concluded 8 formal agreements ("Russian Deputy Prime Minister," 2024).

In June 2024, Russia and Pakistan signed an MoU on breakwaters, followed by the trial launch of a freight train (Ali, 2024). During this phase, Pakistan and Russia diversified their strategic partnership, where both nations used multilateral forums to advance their relationship and seek mutual interests under the polarize global environment.

Converging Strategic Interests: Counterterrorism, Afghanistan and Central Asia

Pakistan and Russia further aligned on shared concerns over regional terrorism, drug trafficking and the Afghan crisis. Afghanistan has been viewed as a source of regional instability by both Russia and Pakistan and they have mutually coordinated to support a peaceful political settlement post-US withdrawal.

Russia and Pakistan's concerns mutually complement each other, where Russia is focused on preventing the spread of extremism into Central Asia, while Pakistan aims to secure its western border to maintain domestic stability. Pakistan and Russia have conducted joint training, exchanged intelligence and participated in multilateral drills under the framework of the SCO Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS) (Government of Pakistan, 2021).

In 2021, diplomatic coordination between the two countries also intensified when Foreign Minister Shah Mehmood Qureshi and Sergei Lavrov held bilateral meetings focusing on the Afghanistan peace

effort. Russia also supported Pakistan's role in the Moscow format, a consultation platform on Afghanistan that includes major regional stakeholders ("Pakistan, Russia agree," 2021).

Analysis of the Growing Pak-Russia Relations in the Context of the Afghan Issue

Several factors, including changing regional and world dynamics, have paved the way for the Pak-Russia relationship growth. The significant reason is their bilateral geostrategic concern. Russia is concerned about the three major issues posed by Afghanistan. The first is terrorism, the second is armed and narcotrafficking, and the third is the Jihadist mindset of the Taliban, which can lead to instability and regional threat, as witnessed during the Chechnyan War (Hofmann, 2016).

On the other hand, Pakistan is also facing challenges along the porous Pak-Afghan border. The geography of Pak-Afghan borderline is difficult, allowing the guerrilla fighters and terrorists to easily hide themselves. The Pamir mountain range surrounds the Southern area of Afghanistan, while the northern part is bounded by the Hindu Kush and Himalaya ranges, creating significant geographical complexities. Pakistan and Afghanistan share nine formal border crossings; three share international status, including Chaman, Torkham and Spin Boldak. The other six borders are mutual crossings. To proceed with illegal activities such as smuggling, human trafficking, drug trafficking and arms trafficking, locals have discovered several other points (Carnavistan, 2019).

Hence, the argument presented by the theory of "Complex interdependence" applies here, which says: "Issues in international relations are interconnected. States frequently interconnect under diverse problems and collectively find solutions. The practice of issue linkages enables States to discover interests in various areas, fostering cooperation even amid conflict" (Keohane & Nye, 2011).

Since the security issues of Pakistan and Russia are interconnected, both are working together to address these issues and find solutions via cooperation under regional and international organisations, as well as in bilateral settings.

Pak-Russia Collaboration in the Afghanistan Peace Process

Pakistan and Russia have been working together for over a decade, driven by their shared interests in Afghanistan and Central Asia. This cooperation has been strengthened by their joint efforts in the Afghan peace process, with both countries emphasizing a negotiated settlement that addresses the concerns of regional states. Pakistan and Russia control the northern and southern corridors to Afghanistan, respectively, which has led to a strengthening of regional ties and serves as a symbol of peace and prosperity for Afghanistan and Central Asia (Khatoon, et. al., 2023).

According to the insight given by the political scientist Sohail Ahmed on the interests of Pakistan and Russia: The long-term strategic interest of Pakistan in Afghanistan is to counter terrorist groups like ISIS and limit Indian influence. Similarly, Russia's interest is to prevent extremist group and their spillover effect in Central Asia through Afghanistan. Moreover, Russia also wanted to maintain its influence in all those formerly part of the Soviet Union. Both of them need to leave behind their traditional partners. The shift of alliance between them is gradual and Pakistan has greater resistance in this regard than Russia. Both Russia and Pakistan share a similar interest and want diversification in the regional partnership to fill the power vacuum in Afghanistan (Ahmed S, personal communication, July 4, 2024).

He further exemplified his stance on Russia's geostrategic interest in Afghanistan and Pakistan, noting that as seen in the Russian-Ukraine war, Russia aims to counter the influence of the United States to hold its influence in the region. Russia shares a similar motive in South Asia.

Opportunities for Multilateral Engagement

The relationship between Russia and Pakistan has significantly evolved, having a growing focus on multilateral cooperation driven by shared geostrategic interests and regional security concerns. Their active participation in international and regional forums such as SCO, BRICS and INSTC, highlights a mutual commitment to addressing common challenges and promoting stability in South and Central Asia (Vorobyev, 2021). The multilateral forums include SCO, BRICS and INSTC.

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) was established in 2001, while Pakistan and India became its members in 2017 (Shanghai Cooperation Organization, 2017).

Within the SCO platform and framework, both countries have gotten an opportunity to cooperate on counterterrorism, regional stability and economic integration. Pakistan's membership enhances its access to multilateral initiatives such as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC) which aligns with the SCO's goal of boosting regional connectivity (Rauf, 2019). Gawadar ports' strategic location further supports multilateral trade by connecting Russia and Pakistan providing access to Central Asian global markets (Morgulov, 2023).

SCO also provides a neutral platform balancing South Asia tensions by including both Pakistan and India. For instance, during the Pulwama incident, Russia and China played a balancing-roles and maintain neutrality by urging dialogues, supporting regional stability.

According to the Institute of Strategic Studies Islamabad 2023, the inclusion of Pakistan in the SCO has increased its trade with member states and enhanced diplomatic engagement, highlighting its value as a multilateral platform (Amin, 2023). Overall, SCO enables Pakistan and Russia to collaborate within cooperative platform, where both countries are connecting to achieve their mutual goals through regional cooperation, attaining regional stability under the multi-polar regional order.

BRICS

Within the multilateral context, the BRICS group, comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa, provides as an increasingly vital platform for economic growth, political collaboration and collective responses to global challenges. Although Pakistan is not yet a member of BRICS, in November 2023, under the interim government of PM Anwaar-ul-Haq Kaker, it formally applied for membership of BRICS to expand its multilateral cooperation and strengthen ties with Russia. With Russia chairing BRICS in 2024 and China's strong support, Pakistan's prospects for joining the organisation appear promising, despite the potential opposition from India (Hussain, 2023). The September 18, 2024, meeting between Russia's Deputy Prime Minister Alexei Overchuk and Pakistani Foreign Minister Ishaq Dar in Islamabad further signalled Russia's support for Pakistan's bid to join BRICS. However, official consensus from all member states is required for approval, and India poses a major obstacle in this regard (Gul, 2024).

The International North-South Transport Corridor: Opportunities for Pakistan-Russia Cooperation

The International North South Transport Corridor (INSTC) is a 7,200 kilometer multi-modal trade network designed to link Russia, Iran, and India with Europe, aiming to reduce transit time and costs compared to the traditional routes like the Suez Canal. It is comprised of three main routes:

- a) Western, via Azerbaijan
- b) Central, via the Caspian Sea
- c) Eastern, via Central Asia and Iran

The corridor is intended to boost trade connectivity across Eurasia. For Pakistan and Russia, the INSTC presents a major opportunity to expand Economic Cooperation, enhance regional connectivity and strengthen their strategic partnership (Burna-Asefi, 2024).

In 2023, President of Russia, Vladimir Putin, offered Pakistan to join INSTC during the State of the Union Address, which was accepted by Pakistan. As Pakistan's Ambassador to Russia, Muhammad Khalid Jamali said: "Pakistan has, in principle, agreed to join the North-South International Transport Corridor and has initiated the necessary procedures" (Haider, 2024). For Pakistan, the integration of INSTC would open access to Central Asia, Russia and European markets which would enable export growth in different fields, including textiles, agriculture and manufactured goods and Russia in return, would gain direct and cost-effective access to South Asian markets which would make bilateral trade more competitive (Hussain & Mahmood, 2019).

Findings

The Pak-Russia relationship is based on mutual interest, partnership, investment and cooperation, unlike Pak's relationship with United States, which is based on a carrot and stick approach, that offers financial aid to comply and threatens sanctions to enforce compliance.

Both Pakistan and Russia face threats from terrorism, drug trafficking and extremism originating by Afghanistan, which converges their interest in peacebuilding through the cooperation under the SCO framework.

In terms of geostrategic convergence, Pakistan seeks to limit Indian influence, while Russia aims to prevent extremist spillover into Central Asia and curb US dominance in South Asia.

Russia, being a major gas exporter, is vital for Pakistan's energy security. With Pakistan's annual energy need exceeding supply by 9%, the revival of Pakistan-Russia gas pipeline and discounted energy offers pave the way for mutual cooperation.

Pakistan seeks BRICS membership to reduce its dependency on the West through its de-dollarization approach, which could help Pakistan in reducing its dependency on the IMF-led loans and its heavy conditions.

CONCLUSION

The relationship between Pakistan and Russia has evolved from Cold War hostility to pragmatic cooperation, shaped by mutual strategic needs and changing global dynamics. During the Cold War period, Pakistan was strongly aligned with the US, while the Soviet Union partnered with India, which

constrained bilateral ties. After the collapse of the USSR, both countries reassessed their foreign policies and by the beginning of the 21st century, cooperation began to improve. China's rise and initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), particularly the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), have become a focal point of the shift in the relationship since Russia was seeking connectivity and warm water resources along with economic integration. CPEC plays a major role in this context. Both nations also cooperate within the organizations, like SCO, to address mutual concerns related to terrorism, narcotics and stability. This has increased their ties in defense arm deals, military exercises and technology transfers, boosting mutual relations and security capabilities. However, challenges remain such as balancing relationships with the US and Russia, similarly in the context of Russia with India to sustain economic stability and managing the regional security risks. Yet, the opportunities are substantial: enhanced trade connectivity and strategic collaboration position Pakistan and Russia as emerging partners that have the capability of shaping South Asian and broader geopolitical dynamics. In a nutshell, their evolving relationship reflects a strategic realignment from historical divergence towards pragmatic convergence, grounded in shared concerns over economic security and diplomatic interest, bringing deeper cooperation in a multilateral world order.

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Date of Publication	March 25, 2025
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